

VZCZCXRO2377
OO RUEHDE RUEHROV RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNR #2600/01 3220507
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 170507Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7601
INFO RUCNSOM/SOMALIA COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CJTF HOA

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 002600

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/E

E.O. 12356: N/A

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SO](#)

SUBJECT: SOMALIA - MERKA, OTHER LOWER SHABELLE TOWNS CHANGE HANDS

1.(SBU) Summary: From November 11 - 13, in what appeared to be a scramble for territorial control, al-Shabaab and former Islamic Court Union (ICU) militias allied with the moderate Islamist Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) Chairman Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed have separately taken control of five Lower Shabelle towns, including the important port town and regional capital Merka. In Merka, al-Shabaab capitalized on internal clan dynamics to oust the militia of warlord Indha-Adde, a move welcomed by the Biyamal/Dir, the dominant subclan of Merka's inhabitants, who had felt marginalized by Indha-Adde's Habr Gedr/Ayr administration and militias.

12. (SBU) Separately, ICU militias loyal to ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif moved into Elesha Biyaha, an IDP settlement between Afgoye and Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab's take over of Lower Shabelle towns strategically bordering Mogadishu is both a show of defiance of the Djibouti accord and a display of power and control. End Summary.

Al-Shabaab
Daggers Drawn

13. (SBU) Between November 11 to 13, al-Shabaab militias took control of the Lower Shabelle towns of Qoryoley, Bulla Marer, Owdheegle, Janaale and Merka. The strategic port city of Merka, Lower Shabelle's regional capital, had been under the control of militias loyal to Sheikh Mohamed Yusuf "Indha-Adde" (a former warlord-turned-cleric and ICU minister of defense who is now formally allied with ARS-Asmara but generally viewed by Somalis as a self-interested warlord). Al-Shabaab met little resistance in capturing Merka on November 12.

Shabaab Exploits
Clan Resentments

14. (SBU) Post's contacts in Somalia told us that the Biyamal/Dir subclan, the dominant subclan in Merka over the years, had felt marginalized by Habr Gedir/Ayr subclan militias under Indha-Adde's command. Embassy contact Mukhtar Mohamed, himself an Ayr, told us that although the Biyamal are the majority in Merka, employment opportunities in most of the 33 local and international agencies which operated there went to Indha-Adde's clan. In addition, Mohamed said, the local administration in Merka forced residents to pay high taxes. Al-Shabaab exploited existing resentments to expel the former administration, a move welcomed by the locals, Mohamed said. Abdi Ismail, a Mogadishu-based freelance journalist, confirmed that it was an al-Shabaab militia --the majority of which are Digil and Mirifle with an admixture of other clans-- that seized control of Merka.

15. (SBU) An international aid worker with excellent contacts in Merka told us that al-Shabaab's entry had been orderly and had not been resisted by the residents. Shortly after taking control of

Merka, an al-Shabaab spokesman had addressed the residents, had requested calm, and said that all in the city should go about their business. The compounds of the World Food Program and other international NGOs had not been harmed by al-Shabaab, our contact reported. Employees of the agencies had been told by their NGO leaderships to stay at home pending talks with al-Shabaab representatives.

Sheikh Sharif's ICU

¶6. (SBU) On November 12, ICU militia loyal to Sheikh Sharif reportedly occupied Elasha Biyaha, a large IDP settlement between Afgoye and Mogadishu, in Lower Shabelle. Spokesman Abdirahim Adow alleged that the ICU was forced to take action after residents complained of insecurity and exploitation by the local administration.

¶7. (SBU) On November 12, Mogadishu residents were treated to a rare show of courage by a group of prominent Mogadishu clerics. The sheikhs gathered at abu-Huraira Mosque (an al-Shabaab controlled mosque near Bakara Market) and openly criticized the use of force for whatever reason. Both Ismail and Mukhtar told us that the congregation at the mosque was associated with both al-Shabaab and the ICU. One month ago it had been unthinkable to criticize the use of violence at abu-Huraira without provoking retribution by al-Shabaab. Mogadishu contacts pegged the shift to Sheikh Sharif's growing influence in the wake of his recent visit to Somalia. The clerics, Ismail said, took the podium in succession and extensively quoted from Islamic sources in condemned the violence. (A recent incident in Kismayu, where a minor was stoned to death was also

NAIROBI 00002600 002 OF 002

condemned, albeit indirectly.) The speeches at the mosque were broadcast in full by some radio stations while others carried excerpts on their daily news programs.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Al-Shabaab's capture of Merka and the other Lower Shabelle towns is a show of defiance intended to sabotage the Djibouti process and demonstrate that they are in control on the ground on the heels of ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif's travel to Somalia following the declaration, in Djibouti on October 26 of an ARS - TFG unity government. In a November 13 telephone call with Special Envoy Yates, Sheikh Sharif indicated that al-Shabaab's entry into Merka was not the last chapter of the struggle now under way for the Lower Shabelle.
Ranneberger